CLAIMS

1. A method of operating a communications system comprising

a packet-switched network, a circuit-switched network, a plurality of gateways connecting the circuit-switched network to the packet-switched network, the method comprising;

a) receiving packet traffic at one of the gateways;

b) establishing in the circuit-switched network a circuit from the gateway to a node on the circuit-switched network; and

c) outputting the said packet traffic from the gateway onto the circuit; characterised by

d) outputting from a plurality of gateways polling messages addressed to the destination address of the packet traffic;

e) receiving at the gateways replies from the destination address;

f) determining the respective delays for the replies at the different respective gateways;

g)selecting one of the gateways depending on the respective delay times;

h) establishing the virtual circuit to the gateway selected in step (g).

2. A method according to claim 1, in which the circuit-switched network includes a plurality of independently controlled networks and different ones of the plurality of gateways are connected to different respective ones of the plurality of networks.

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3. A method according to claim 1 or 2, in which one or more of the gateways communicate a respective delay time to a control node and the step of selecting one of the gateways is carried out by the control node.

4. A method according to claim 3, in which only the or each gateway having a respective delay value less than a threshold value communicates the delay value to the control node.

5. A method according to any one of the preceding claims in which the packets are Internet Protocol (IP) packets.

6. A method according to any one of the preceding claims in which the circuit-switched network is an ATM (asynchronous transfer mode) network.

7. A control node for use in a method according to any one of the preceding claims, the control node including a control processor and a signalling interface, which signalling inteface, in use, communicates signals with a plurality of gateways in a circuit-switched network, the control processor being arranged to carry out the following steps in sequence:

   a) communicating instructions to the plurality of gateways to transmit polling messages to a destination address in a circuit-switched network connected to the gateways;

   b) receiving from the plurality of gateways indications of respective delays in responses to the polling messages:

   c) selecting, depending on the respective delays, one of the gateways as the end-point of a virtual circuit.

8. A gateway for use in a method according to any one of the preceding claims, the gateway including a first interface for connection to a packet-switched network, a second interface for connection to a circuit-switched network, and a control processor including a control interface arranged to communicate control signals with a control node, the control processor being arranged to carry out the following steps in sequence:

   a) in response to a control message from the control mode transmitting a polling message to a destination address in the circuit-switched network;

   b) receiving a reply from the destination address and determining the delay of the reply;

   c) communicating the reply to the control node.

9. A communications network including a control node according to claim 7 and a ~~gateway according to claim 8.~~